

Learning How to Learn: Preparing Expatriate Intern to Work in a Japanese Organization

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Abstract

This study explores the training for U.S. Americans and Canadians working in internships in Japanese organizations, and reviews aspects of the adjustment and social learning process as described by the interns and how, after arriving in their work setting, they learned how to learn interpersonal, intercultural competencies on the job. Four themes emerged as consistently most important: (1) attention to language learning; (2) the importance of asking questions; (3) letting go of time and space boundaries; (4) learning to trust – especially toward supervisors. More attention needs to be given in orientation and training programs to guide sojourners to develop sensitivities to ways of learning about the national and organizational cultures in their work environments.

Key words: American Interns, Japanese organization, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural training, Cultural adaptation

“Internationally, the Americans have preferred to see themselves as teachers more than as students, while historically, the Japanese have seen themselves more as students than as teachers.” Glen Fukushima

1. Introduction

A study of training for “US Americans” and other Western expatriate interns working in Japan is significant for at least three reasons:

(1) For much of the first part of the half-century history of intercultural communication studies, the discipline has been closely connected to U.S.-Japanese communication comparisons (Condon, 1984). The reasons lie outside of the focus of this study, but any review of the international intercultural communication literature shows a prominence of writers and researchers working across these national cultures. This coincided with a political and economic history that brought the two nations together and which in turn created institutional relationships that shaped new and enduring programs of international exchange including those described in this paper. As noted below, little of this U.S.-Japan communication gave attention to the U.S. personnel in subordinate roles, working within a Japanese context and in the Japanese language. Intercultural training and publications were directed primarily to those in management seeking a Japanese market, including some who were seeking to form joint ventures.

(2) From the beginning of the field of intercultural communication, the role of “training” has been central (Pusch, 2004). It was not enough to note differences in values and communication styles and conflicts; rather, throughout this history, teaching and training for specific goals has been important. The first intercultural communication association formed within the academic community gave attention to training co-equal with research and teaching: the Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research (SIETAR) (Pusch, 2004, 2008). The place of “training” as part of an academic organization owes more to the U.S. “pragmatism” tradition than to Japanese organizational conventions.

(3) Internship programs originating in the late 1980s marked the first time when U.S. Americans and Canadians were encouraged to go to work in Japan in order to learn and sharpen abilities that were important to them professionally (DeAngelis, 1997, Nishimura, 1997). Previously, U.S. sojourner history has been one of individuals who went abroad for a variety of reasons. Some were artists and writers. Some sought adventure or escape. Many traveled to teach or promulgate beliefs -- technical and government advisors, missionaries, teachers, or military personnel. What is unique about the Japan internship experience by U.S. Americans (as well as Canadians and more recently others from many countries) is that they enter Japanese organizations in subordinate positions, comparable to entry-level, working in a language in which most feel uncertain and insecure, and going with the awareness that they will learn (“gain experience”) more than contribute.

1.1. Social-Historical Context

To appreciate the motivation and expectations of both interns and their host organizations, it is helpful to be aware of the social and economic context in which intercultural communication training and the Japanese internships programs appeared. When the field of intercultural communication studies emerged during the 1970s, the term “communication” had no equivalent in the Japanese language and was borrowed from English. Within the next decade, “communication” and “intercultural communication,” as words and as programs at universities, spread rapidly. The interest in training and intercultural communication training in Japan, largely with U.S. models, also emerged during this period. The Japanese attention to intercultural communication teaching and training has been closely tied to foreign language study, primarily English. Within Japan, domestic intercultural issues, including concerns about diversity received little attention compared to international issues. Within the U.S. “intercultural communication” as an academic emphasis and as a professional training emphasis has been largely separate from the learning of other languages.

The 1980s saw a radical change in international and intercultural relations with the rise of Japanese economic strength and business success in the automotive and electronic sectors most notably. This evoked, abroad, admiration and for some, a spasm of “Japan bashing.” The more enduring effect, however, was a rise in Japanese language teaching in schools outside of Japan, including the U.S., and a plethora of books and television programs about Japan and on issues of communication with the Japanese, especially in management. The period of the 1980s also saw the creation of governmental programs designed to promote better international and intercultural understanding between Japan and the United States. U.S. President Carter and Japanese Prime Minister Ohira signed an agreement that both societies needed to develop new global roles and make an effort to “internationalize” their societies (Japan-United States Economic Relations Group, 1981). From that time, “internationalization” (“*kokusaika*”) became a catchword in Japan to encourage support for foreign employees, international schools, and other exchange programs (Lebra, 1993). The original intent included an emphasis on promoting Japanese culture abroad, but within Japan the term “*kokusaika*,” while generally perceived as positive, was also seen as greater “Westernization” or “whiteningization” within Japan (Fujimoto, 2001).

During this period two important “internationalization” programs were begun in Japan with the support of the Japanese government. The largest was the JET program (Japan Exchange and Teaching Program), established in 1987, which invited young college and university graduates from overseas to participate in international exchange and foreign language education within Japan. Among its best known features has been the hiring of thousands of university graduates from the U.S., Canada, U.K. Australia and New Zealand to work for a year or more as language and culture informants in junior high and high school English language classes (which are required) throughout Japan. Later the program expanded to include graduates from other nations and serving as models for learning other languages (McConnell, 2000).

Smaller and less publicized was the JIMT (The U.S.-Japan Industry and Technology Management Training) program which initially invited university graduates (and later those who were still in school) to come to Japan to work as interns in Japanese organizations, a program more modest in its numbers but in some ways more novel and bolder in its vision. M.I.T. was the model program (Gercik, 1992), with MIT professors with personal connections with Japanese colleagues encouraging the process. With the support and encouragement – some would say “pressure” – from the Japanese government, companies throughout Japan welcomed young foreign interns to work in their offices and laboratories (Masumoto, 2000). It should be noted that at that time there was no word, nor category, comparable to what the word “intern” represents in English, except in the context of medical school interns.

By the 1990s, Japanese society had changed. It was longer novel to see gaijin (literally “foreigner,” but in effect, “Westerner”) speaking Japanese comfortably on television as previously they would have been regarded as a novelty. Expectations for expatriates increased, just as the number of Japanese who had studied or worked abroad increased. In short, this was an era of “push-pull” -- a push by the Japanese government emphasis on kokusaika, inviting expatriate interns, and the pull for expatriates to serve as interns in Japanese organizations. This was a unique period in intercultural relations, and an important period. Historic and symbolic relationships were inverted, where the brightest Westerners sought subordinate roles in a foreign organization in order to learn. Thus it is also important to learn from the experience of the expatriates -- what they learned and anticipated, and how they responded. It is an ongoing story.

1.2. Learning in Intercultural Transitions

Theory and research on sojourner transitions and adjustment have suggested a number of qualities of the individual sojourner that seem significant in making a successful transition required of an expatriate working in a Japanese organization. Although not specifically applied to the cross-cultural adaptation, Social Cognitive Theory provides one basis for understanding some of the mechanisms of adjusting to new environments (Kim, 2005; Masumoto, 2000). Literature indicates that personality characteristics such as open-mindedness and cultural empathy, creativity, a sense of humor, integrity, sincerity, stress tolerance, self-efficacy, and self-monitoring can provide measurements in cross-cultural adaptation (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Black, 1988; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Harrison et al., 1996; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Bandura (1995) suggested that people’s beliefs regarding their efficacy can be developed by four types of influences: (1) mastery experience, where individuals overcome obstacles through perseverance; (2) vicarious experiences, where individuals observe similar models; (3) social persuasion, as individual’s beliefs are strengthened by others; and (4) physiological and emotional states, where individuals judge their own capabilities.

People’s beliefs in their own efficacy enable them to predict events and to develop ways to influence those events that affect their lives. Those problem-solving skills require effective cognitive processing of information that involves many complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties (Bandura, 1995). Black et al. (1991) also stated that individuals with high self-efficacy have a tendency to persist in presenting new behaviors and, therefore, have greater opportunities for receiving feedback about their acquired skills than those with low self-efficacy. Harrison et al. (1996) presented the view that self-efficacy is correlated with cultural adjustment. The higher the self-efficacy that people indicate, the better they can actually deal with their life in general, interaction with hosts, and the work environment in a new culture.

Self-efficacy – including self-confidence to initiate conversations or raise questions – may hold special significance for U.S. interns in Japanese organizations because of the U.S. perception that Japanese supervisors do not give sufficient “feedback,” even as Japanese supervisors feel that they are constantly giving feedback (Clarke, 1998; Condon & Masumoto, 2011; Masumoto, 2000). Interns who returned from a positive experience in Japan reported that they were still not sure how their work was regarded by supervisors and colleagues. Also crucial in learning is the type of information provided by different sources and how that is chosen or ignored. Ottingen (1995) proposes that how this is selected and integrated into one’s self-efficacy judgment is central in making a successful transition into another culture. If one observes that the valued role model is one that pursues a group goal rather than an individual goal and can incorporate that into one’s self-efficacy judgment, that will be most important. Another line of theory relates to culturally preferred styles of learning. This seems especially promising in the present study, for while orientation and intercultural communication training prior to departure may fit the sojourner’s preferences and expectations, the form of learning required in the new setting and preferred in the host culture may not be what the expatriate intern is prepared for.

This theme was developed in a now classic article written about U.S. Peace Corps training, which argued that the kind of learning needed by volunteers was not what is conventionally called for and rewarded in the academic classroom. This included trusting one’s feelings, attending to nonverbal behavior and discovering reliable local resources among other characteristics (Harrison & Hopkins, 1967). Edward T. Hall indicated three kinds of learning: Formal Learning where the teacher-student relationship is clear; Informal Learning where the individual “catches on,” or “picks up” the right way through observing others and through trial and error; and Technical Learning where verbal instruction is presented in such detail that today it might be called “user friendly” (Hall, 1959).

The importance of Informal learning was also implicit in his later theory of communication and context (Hall, 1976). Japanese organizations value both Formal and Technical learning, and provide within the Formal framework opportunities for the newly arrived member to learn informally as he or she acculturates in the work and social settings each day.

2. The Present Research

This study is part of a longitudinal investigation (1997-2012) of the intercultural communication experiences of U.S. and Canadian interns working in Japan in Japanese organizations. The present research is based on interviews (60-120 minutes each) with 27 interns at their jobs in Japan and after their return to the U.S. and Canada (all interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis). Interviews were also conducted with the interns' supervisors and co-workers (Masumoto, 2000). Intern ages ranged from 24-45, with a median age of 29; 24 were male, 3, female. All had at least a bachelor's degree, and 8 held advanced degrees. All had prior work experience and had completed at least one year of Japanese language study at the university level. Seven interns had management and business majors, while 20 had majored in the science and engineering fields. Those with science backgrounds worked both in laboratory and office settings.

The following research questions were addressed.

1. What pre-departure intercultural communication training was offered to the interns?
2. To what extent do interns feel that the pre-departure training was helpful?
3. Was there any guidance during pre-departure training programs on how one might "learn how to learn" once one had entered the Japanese organization?
4. What kind of training (or orientation) was provided by the host organization?
5. Once in the job, whom do interns feel were most helpful?

2.1. Research Question 1

What pre-departure intercultural communication training was offered to the interns?

There was little difference in the kind and length of intercultural communication training for those whose internship was three months or less, and those whose commitment was for 12-24 months. One university offered a full semester course on intercultural communication with the emphasis on Japan; all others offered either a one or two day workshop on intercultural communication. All required or recommended at least one book as part of the workshop or class. Workshop training usually included guest speakers, video presentations, role playing, and case studies. Much attention was given to social norms and "manners." The question of pre-departure training, however, is complicated by the kind and length of Japanese language study required for participants. Language study almost certainly includes some degree of cultural exposure, though the extent and intent varies with the instructors and goals of the language program.

In addition, each university program devoted considerable time to the process of making contact with the host organizations in Japan, and the legal and other documentation, travel arrangements, etc., required for anyone going to work in Japan.

2.2. Research Question 2

To what extent do interns feel that their pre-departure training was helpful?

All interns reported that their training was helpful, with many mentioning guest speakers, particularly if the person had worked as an expatriate in a Japanese organization. Four interns said that the training or the books read had led them to have expectations which were not met when they were actually in their new work setting in Japan. Most often mentioned were descriptors that were over-generalized ("collectivist," for example) or in some cases based on out of date information.

Most of the training and orientation programs were centered on Japanese culture-specific information – e.g., "Japanese patterns of communication" – with little or no attention to the intercultural communication process. Language teachers are almost always Japanese, and the subject of the transition and acculturation process, when included, described general patterns often organized around the theme of "culture shock." Interns found the basic guidance regarding manners helpful as a beginning, but as one intern said "you really need to have someone explain things in ways that help us to understand the context and underlying meanings."

2.3. Research Question 3

Was there any guidance during pre-departure training on how one might “learn how to learn” once one had entered the Japanese organization?

This question, which is central to this report, was asked directly only in later interviews. From all interviews one may infer that there was little guidance or discussion of how one learns on the job, or how one seeks or engages with a mentor. Further discussion on this topic appears in the discussion of themes below.

2.4. Research Question 4

What kind of training (or orientation) was provided by the host organization?

The most significant factor regarding training for the newly arrived intern was the time of arrival. Internships, of varying lengths and host expectations, begin throughout the year. Japanese organizational culture, including academic culture, begins in April. This is when the new hires begin their acculturation into the organization and it shapes how they are identified within the organization and their own place in the fundamental hierarchy of the organization (Nakane, 1967; Condon and Masumoto, 2011). This is where shared experiences among the new hires are formed. Those interns who entered the organization at the same time as new Japanese hires had a significantly different, and in most cases, a stronger immediate involvement in the organization than those whose personal or other institutional schedules had them arriving at other times during the year, even though their status as outsiders was recognized. Interns who entered at the time of the new hires participated in the same orientation and evening social activities designed to encourage strong bonds of relationships. Interns who entered at other times of the year (the majority) received varying degrees of orientation, depending on the size of the organization and the experience of hosting interns. In all cases, one person was formally assigned to be responsible for the intern; in most cases this person was in a supervisory role and became among the most important mentor in the intern's experience.

2.5. Research Question 5

Once in the job, whom do interns feel were most helpful?

Interns credit their supervisor and their project instructor as especially helpful. The comments of one former intern is representative of what many reported:

I found that two things are very useful in involving myself in the company. First, maintaining a presence of dependency on my supervisor or senpai. This allows them to feel more at ease and so much more likely to get me involved. Second, intentions are critical. Showing an intention to be part of the group lets others know that you are willing to make a contribution. If you work for the group, the group will be more apt to work for you.

3. Discussion

3.1. Attention to language

The demands of not just speaking but also reading and, to a lesser extent, writing Japanese, were omnipresent and of two kinds. Feelings of inadequacy but also a mark of increased self-efficacy were mentioned often. In interviews with Japanese supervisors especially, and to a lesser extent with intern colleagues, revealed a theme of disappointment in the level of competency of the newly arrived interns. As noted previously, intercultural communication studies in Japan were and still are closely associated with foreign language learning.

It appears likely that most Japanese intercultural communication trainers have worked or studied outside of Japan, and most often using English. In contrast, the language experience of U.S. intercultural communication teachers and trainers has been primarily within the comfort zone of their own language. Significant in this study is that those who reported the greatest gain in Japanese language competence were also those who indicated gains in other aspects of intercultural communication competence. Mostly ignored in the literature on intercultural communication and transition is the significance of language competence.

For anyone living or working in a place where the language is not one that the sojourner – intern, immigrant, expatriate – is comfortable with, it may be “language” that is foremost as a factor in communication, a sense of self-efficacy, and identity.

Intercultural communication literature generally assumes a level of language competence or ignores the question entirely. Japanese supervisors said that they were led to expect a higher competency in the Japanese language than interns were capable of. Perhaps out of a desire to encourage people to undertake a year of Japanese language study and to participate in an internship program, little attention was given to language issues in the intercultural communication training. Most training was conducted in English, and there was little or no discussion of communication issues related to language competence. Interns and supervisors alike describe considerable increase in proficiency during the internship, especially for those whose commitment was longer. It is also significant that interns indicate that their comfort and fluency developed as they became more comfortable in their work setting.

3.2. Asking questions

Issues around “asking questions” came up in nearly all the interviews. While U.S. interns indicated that they were reluctant to ask questions, asking questions seems to occur much more frequently within Japanese organizations than the interns had expected. Interns said that they hesitated to ask questions because they felt that if they did so they would not seem professional, and that asking questions would be embarrassing or lower their status or otherwise cause them to lose face. In Japanese organizations, however, new employees are encouraged to ask questions about their jobs. A Japanese proverb says “Kiku wa ittoki no haji, Kikanu wa matsudai made no haji” – Asking is a shame for the moment, but not learning by not asking questions is a shame for life.

Normally, among Japanese first-year employees (Shinnyu-shain) there is an unspoken rule that they should learn as much as possible during that year by asking. That year is a time to learn but not a year to show knowledge. Interns consistently felt, at least initially, a reluctance to ask questions and to somehow demonstrate their knowledge.

I have found that by asking about aspects of the Japanese culture that curiosity usually opens the doors for further interaction. I ask questions about their projects and their progress on them. I also try to communicate in Japanese as much as possible to let them know that I am trying and that I am interested in their culture.

This finding seems especially important regarding training and orientation programs. It may be assumed that those who participate in intercultural communication training are comfortable to ask “cultural” or intercultural questions – that is why they are in the training. In their work situation, however, the U.S. Americans especially seem reluctant to ask work or professional questions of their supervisor or colleagues because they fear they will seem inadequate in the area in which they most want to be acknowledged.

3.3. Loosening time and space boundaries

The most frequently mentioned challenges for the newly arrived interns were about space and time. In the open plan of large Japanese offices, there is no privacy, such as provided by partitions or cubicles. Interns all felt uncomfortable because of this lack of privacy, at least during the first weeks in the organization. It took more than a month for most of the interns to adjust to feeling exposed while trying to perform the work assigned them. Later, however, many said that they came to appreciate the open office in part because co-workers could see when an intern was having some problems and could come to offer assistance even before the intern asked. The ambiguity of the time schedule was a second challenge mentioned by every intern. Leaving the office at the end of the assigned work hours, such as promptly at 5:15 P.M. offered the interns an “escape” from what felt like exposure to the group while also fulfilling the job description.

The problem was that the interns soon discovered that no one else in the office was leaving at that time. One intern described her experience:

I think I’m doing something wrong because everyone looks at me funny when I leave. I didn’t want to do anything wrong and I wanted to be more like the others in the group. I asked someone what I was doing wrong and why nobody else was leaving when I was leaving. They explained, ‘Well, it looks better if you stay until 6:00 pm. Tomorrow, just stay until six and you’ll notice that everybody leaves at six.’ In my division people stay until six. I felt bad because I thought the others thought I wasn’t working as hard.

She describes this as a transition point in her feelings of acceptance and comfort with her co-workers. After she learned the value of staying overtime, her comfort and learning greatly increased. Another intern also left the office as soon as he finished his work. Later he realized that other people stayed a little longer, although his section leader did not allow his staff to work overtime unnecessarily. He noticed that after the regular work hours the office atmosphere changed, people were more relaxed and talked about various things informally. The intern's supervisor noticed the change of the attitude of the intern. After several weeks, the intern started staying after the work hours, not to work for a project but instead to study Japanese, chat with other co-workers, and read manuals. Even if the interns were not asked to stay longer, the interns adjusted their work hours so as to not distinguish that they had finished working earlier than others. In interviews the supervisors said they thought that this showed that the interns paid attention to others and made an effort to adapt to the Japanese work style.

3.4. Learning to trust

A "trust" theme emerged in the interviews: trusting those whom one meets and works with each day, irrespective of role and rank, but especially trusting one's supervisor. Trusting that one's coworkers will be helpful during the time between the formal end of the workday and the time people leave the office was crucial for many interns to feel more integrated into the organization and personally more comfortable at work. This also resulted in a gradual increase in competence and confidence, both in work projects and in Japanese language learning.

One intern said, "Trust the supervisor, or whoever is over them. I know of many cases where an intern didn't take the advice that the supervisor had offered to them and the interns ended up disliking a lot of the essence of Japanese culture that actually most people relish."

Another intern observed:

People, if they have a set image of what Japan is going to be like and they don't go with an open mind then as soon as [the situation] changes, they kind of clam up or they freeze up and shut off to any new experiences that they might be exposed to. I think an open personality where they're willing to maybe just a little bit of an adventurous spirit where they're willing to take things as they come, realize that their skills that they've learned in college and things probably will not be fully utilized at first. But, the more that they follow what their supervisor says, the more they will be trusted with other information and other job responsibilities.

Adjusting one's own way to do things in a new environment takes effort and oftentimes gives uncertainty. Trusting one's supervisor greatly assists the intern's integration into the organization and also helps the intern to understand his or her place in the organization as well.

3.5. Summary

All four of the themes that emerged from the research (attention to language, asking questions without fear of appearing unprofessional, loosening of attention to individualized time and space boundaries, and learning to trust) share one common characteristic: a reduced self-consciousness that can inhibit learning. It is a commonplace that too much self-monitoring slows and reduces language learning; as noted, accepting one's place as new to the Japanese organization brings with it the expectation that one should ask questions; seeking protection through one's own physical space and time schedule can appear defensive and also separate one from the group; and wanting to be self-reliant at the expense of losing the important bonds of relationship with supervisors and colleagues risks missing the entire purpose of working in a Japanese organization.

4. Conclusion

Intercultural communication training programs provide an important preparation for prospective interns going to work in Japan. They are strongest in providing information and general guidance about what to expect and, to some extent, what kind of behavior will be expected as well as an overview of values and behaviors that are central to Japanese culture. Where they might be strengthened, based on the findings in this study, is to offer guidance on ways interns can learn, indeed may be expected to learn, with their supervisors and co-workers once they find themselves at work in Japan. The value of "Informal Learning" seems especially promising, for it is fundamental in the Japanese employee's learning process, such as occurs "after hours" at the office. It is another invitation for the intern to see every situation, at every moment, as a learning opportunity.

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